

Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Cartridge Games & Programs

by Bill Kunkel & Frank Laney

War in Space

Three New Games Fight It Out

Fasten your seat belts and prepare for immediate launch! This month's "Arcade Alley" leaves a planet Earth far behind and rockets into outer space with a trio of science fiction games from as many different manufacturers. They're exciting, fast-moving, and guaranteed to keep even the most devoted science fiction lover content until the next *Star Wars* sequel.

Of course, these aren't the first science fiction video games by a long stretch. The original space war game, in which players maneuvered a spaceship into position to laser a computer-controlled flying saucer, became a smash hit in the nation's fun palaces shortly after Pong made its debut. Today, commercial arcades feature more games with a science fiction slant than any other type.

Manufacturers of home arcades have proven just as eager to capitalize on the current booming interest in outer space. Every maker of video games produces at least one space war cartridge, and most of them include several in their software lineups.

The cartridges we're reviewing this month represent a significant advance over previous offerings. The art of video game design is progressing rapidly, spurred by the furious battle for the allegiance of arcade fans, and the latest releases establish new standards of excellence. The graphics, in particular, are truly fantastic. Special effects in many older science fiction movies pale beside those found in the newest video space games.

Space Invaders (CX 2632) by Atari is a fitting place to begin. Anyone who hasn't fed a dozen quarters into the commercial arcade version of this one must have been on an extended trip to another galaxy. A national mania in Japan. Space invaders became the biggest craze since the pinball machine when Bally introduced it to American arcades. Written up by magazines and sung about by rock groups, Space Invaders is finally available

for the home market.

Atari's version closely resembles the commercial arcade prototype. In this somewhat abstract approach to interplanetary conflict, 36 aliens arranged in six columns march down the screen toward the player's horizontally mobile laser cannon, which is located at the bottom of the field. Three rocket-shaped bunkers initially furnish a measure of protection, but they are quickly riddled by both outgoing and incoming fire.

The player attempts to keep the swine from space from landing on Earth by blasting them out of the sky one by one. There is a slight catch: The aliens are also armed and fire back relentlessly! A player's turn ends when the aliens destroy the cannon, with three such rounds constituting a complete game. If the aliens actually reach Earth, the game stops immediately, regardless of the number of rounds played.

The fewer monsters remaining, the faster they zigzag across the field, so disinte-

grating the last few takes quick reflexes. When the player has dispatched a set of 36 aliens, a new platoon of 36 appears on the screen just a little bit closer to Earth than the previous group.

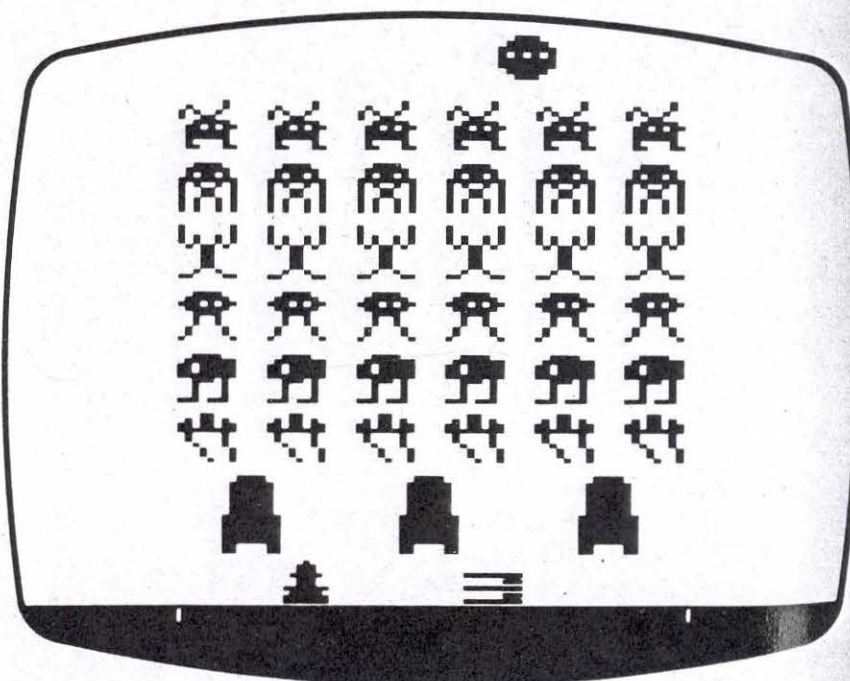
Periodically, the aliens' mother ship whizzes across the top of the screen. It's a wonderful test of the player's greed for bonus points. Although it doesn't actually fire, the mother ship often distracts the player's attention long enough to let one of the monsters knock out the cannon. Hitting the mother ship is the key to achieving scores of more than 5000 points, but novice players are advised to make the aliens their first priority.

As with most Atari cartridges, this one boasts many game variations—112, to be exact. These include one- and two-player formats, invisible aliens, fast-moving bombs, and moving shields. These variants are interesting, but purists—like the ones who write this column—will probably continue to dote on the original.

Invaders from Hyperspace (Magnavox AK 9414) transports the players to the twin solar systems of Terien and Lorien, where interstellar warfare is a way of life. Each four-planet system is under constant attack from alien saucers, with a pair of player-controlled battle cruisers the only effective defense.

Each time laser fire strikes a planet or sun it changes color, progressing through a sequence of five hues. When a battle cruiser is destroyed, the player may launch a replacement from a planet or sun of the same color. Similarly, ships can land only on heavenly bodies of the same color. A saucer can conquer a planet by making it turn the same color. A saucer or battle cruiser crashing into a planet can destroy the world, though the suns are invulnerable to such damage. The winner is the first

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Space Invaders, the popular arcade game, is now available on cartridge with 112 variations.

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The winner is the first player to destroy 10 saucers with a battle cruiser. If the saucers overrun all eight planets—admittedly an unlikely event—then the machine has defeated both human players.

Invaders from Hyperspace is a laudable, if not entirely successful, attempt to do something novel with the space war theme. Despite colorful visuals and exciting sound effects, it's just not the sort of cartridge that holds up well under repeated play. Beneath the multicolored saucers and exploding planets, Invaders from Hyperspace lacks the substance of a true classic video game. Nonetheless, this one belongs in every Magnavox owner's collection, because it can certainly be lots of fun for occasional play.

Space Battle (2612) is one of the most eagerly awaited Mattel Intellivision cartridges. Many arcade addicts wondered if the company could produce a science fiction game of comparable quality to its sports simulations.

The answer is an unqualified yes. Not only is it Mattel's first arcade-style solitaire contest, but Space Battle is the closest any video game player will ever come to experiencing the thrills of piloting an astrofighter in ship-to-ship combat in deep space.

The key to this cartridge is its two-level approach. Players must first make strategic decisions based on observation of a radar

map that charts the approach of five alien squadrons of up to 15 ships each toward the defending mother ship. Once the player has chosen a target and dispatched one of a trio of three-ship fighter groups to deal with it, the game can be switched to a tactical cockpit perspective for the actual resolution of the battle.

If two of the player's fighter groups are engaged with enemies simultaneously, the computer will automatically handle one of the fights. This situation should be avoided whenever possible, since the machine tends to exchange one fighter for three enemies. The human player must do at least twice as well to have a chance of winning, so it's a good idea to time approach-to-target so

that only one flight of astrofighters enters battle at a time.

The enemy ships are hardly sitting ducks. They take several varieties of evasive action, which makes it difficult for the player to get one in the laser sight for more than an instant. To balance this somewhat, it's possible to score a "chain reaction" hit on closely grouped enemy craft and take out several with one shot. The attacking ships are also armed with laser guns, so the player must blend offense and defense in proper proportion.

The need to develop a strategic overview of the situation raises Space Battle high above rival science fiction games. It is entirely possible to win battles with great

marksmanship, only to lose the game when an alien squadron breaks through and obliterates the mother ship.

The graphics and sound effects are what arcaders have come to expect from Mattel—absolutely scintillating. From the multicolored winking stars of the tactical display to the progressively more strident warning horns that indicate imminent destruction of the mother ship, Space Battle is a treat for the eyes and ears. Four speed options keep the game fresh despite increases in player skill, so this jewel of a video game is sure to remain entertaining over a long period of time.

Next month, "Arcade Alley" returns with coverage of the latest home arcade software for the Magnavox Odyssey². 